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SUBJECT: USAU: APRIL 9-11 AFRICAN UNION CONSULTATIVE
MEETING ON WOMEN AND GENDER

¶1. SUMMARY: From April 9-11 the African Union (AU) Consultative Meeting on Women and Gender met in Addis Ababa to review a framework paper to be subsequently endorsed by the AU Council of Ministers as the definitive AU statement on gender policy and gender mainstreaming. Subsequent to the meeting the Women Gender and Development Directorate (WGDD) decided to postpone presentation of the policy from July until the January 2009 AU Summit to allow for refining the document. Deliberations at the ministerial level are scheduled for August. The draft document, as a statement of principles outlining the cross-cutting problems facing women in Africa, is a coherent document, although implementation of the articulated principles remains illusive, as does mainstreaming women's and gender issues into other foci of national, regional and AU policy commitments. The document shows clearly that the AU's member states and the various regional entities aligned with the AU have different policies and priorities when it comes to mainstreaming women's issues, and that the variance of attitudes and approaches makes agreement on a single policy and approach difficult. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

¶2. The driving concept for the Consultative Meeting on Women and Gender is the need to "mainstream" gender issues in all entities, policies, and programs of the African Union Commission (AUC), and to integrate the same concepts in the programs of AU member states. Noting that of the poor of Africa, sixty percent are women, that gender discrimination in education is widespread, and that women face socially sanctioned violence, the participants underlined that the African Union's (AU) Constitutive Act and its Statutes mandate the AU ensure the mainstreaming of gender in all programs and activities, with a view to empowering women and bringing them into the economic development paradigms of the continent. Given the mandate, the AU created a Women Gender and Development Directorate (WGDD) under the Office of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC) to be the implementing arm of the AUC for gender issues. In practical terms this means the WDGG reports to the Chairperson of the Commission, not to the Commissioner for Social Affairs, although the Commissioner for Social Affairs takes an active interest in gender issues.

¶3. The WGDD, prior to drafting the framework paper under discussion, held regional meetings, completed a Gender Audit, and developed a Five-Year Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Plan (GMSP). In collaboration with the UNIDEP it piloted courses on gender responsive economic policy and produced a handbook of best practices in mainstreaming gender. The First AU Conference of Ministers in Charge of Women's Affairs and Gender, meeting in Dakar in October 2005, adopted reporting guidelines for gender issues. The first draft gender policy was prepared in 2007. Because it failed to address certain critical issues and provide a framework, a redrafted policy paper, the subject of discussion at the April 9-11 meeting, was prepared.

14. The draft gender policy document sets the target date of 2015 for inserting gender issues in all AUC organs. It also couches gender equality in the greater context of human rights. However, the WGWW faces an uphill battle to obtain adoption of the policy, as the regional economic communities (RECs) as well as individual countries, have disparate approaches and a plethora of cultural practices and legal provisions that impact directly on women's rights. One of the first step forward is engaging with RECs and individual states to develop a common understanding on gender issues, and subsequently to begin the process of building capacity to implement programs that address gender issues. Ironically, the disparity of practice and attitudes toward gender is evident in the various Commissions and organizations within the AUC and the AU itself. Political will, capacity building, legislative action, civil society involvement and resource mobilization are all essential components for progress toward gender equality.

15. Among the provisions incorporated in the draft AU Gender Policy Document is that the AUC Chairperson will give an annual report to the Heads of State at the Summit on progress with gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment. In addition, the Commissioner will ensure that the AUC, its institutions and its organs adopt a common strategy for promoting women's empowerment. Further, the Commissioner will work with all institutions and organs to develop a regional gender action program for funding, will hold managers accountable for its implementation and will establish sanctions for non-compliance.

16. COMMENT: The Adoption of an African Union Gender Policy, when it comes, will be a significant step forward. The women who participated in the Consultative Meeting do not underestimate the task that lies ahead, first in gaining endorsement for the policy, and then in implementing it. One encouraging dynamic during the meeting was the almost universal recognition that mainstreaming gender issues involves making visible women's roles in the full range of economic and social activities, an approach that is predicated on building alliances rather than tackling adversaries. END COMMENT.

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